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ENGLISH 391: COMPOSITION FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

Personal Beliefs Concerning the Instruction of Writing

17 MARCH 1998

The task of defining a specific philosophy of writing is by no means simple. Like a lecture concerning oral communication, the philosophy seems exemplified more from example than through the actual definition. Observing both the speaker's correct and incorrect aspects of delivery, an individual within the audience can learn as much about speaking as he or she might extract from the actual content of the speech. This is the principle that dominates any written description of the writing process. I say this to advocate a respect of other views toward writing more so than I say it with the purpose of exonerating myself and my own views. In fact, many of the beliefs that I now hold have been borrowed from other classmates, professors, or English scholars. Some previous opinions have been altered somewhat and others have been fortified. I believe my change in views illustrates the importance of openness in the field of English instruction. I am pleased not only to take this opportunity to describe my views as accurately as possible but to also seize the chance to hear ideas that I have not yet encountered.

I should begin by discussing what I believe to be the most difficult area of writing instruction. This portion is aimed toward the mechanics and technicalities of writing. I know how tedious this can be from my experience as a student and I am confident that my students will have a similar view. Like most high school students, I was taught to strictly adhere to the thesis statement and the topic sentence outline. In fact, the usual starting point for each paper was to invent a topic sentence outline and turn it in for the teacher to review. This is what can be called "writing as a product." It begins precisely where the thought process is supposed to end. The student is expected to concoct a pattern for organization of his or her opinions or facts before a single word is written. In most cases, the process of writing a paper for a high school class will begin in the library with research and progress through the thesis, the topic sentence outline, perhaps a rough draft, and then will end with the final product. The teacher is very much uninvolved in the actual process of writing in most cases. Fredric Bogel and Keith Hjortshoj have described this traditional method of instruction as having "an almost exclusive concern with the qualities of finished

writing with little or no attention to the writing process" (4). Some of the greatest disappointments of my high school career occurred when my papers were returned. I might have received only help that I pursued at my own will while I was writing the paper, and I was usually not given a great deal of advice even then. I believe that this is a tyranny that I wish to avoid in my classroom.

On the contrary, the best way to instill an understanding of writing within my students is to swim with them rather than waiting for them on the shore. It seems more sensible to aid them before evaluating them. This involves teaching writing as a process that does not begin after thoughts have ceased. Rather, the thought process should coincide somewhat with the writing process. The two process should gradually benefit from one another. Attempting to organize the essay should help to organize the thoughts, and the improved organization of ideas will in turn appear in the writing. This entire process is broken up into six steps that Catherine D'Aoust describes as nonlinear and recurring. They include prewriting, writing, sharing, revising, editing, and evaluating (1). The traditional methods of writing instruction (writing as a product) employ most if not all of these areas. However, they are followed from start to finish and typically are not repeated. In D'Aoust's method of instruction, the steps take a circular form that returns as many times as necessary to some or all of the previous steps (4). These six steps correspond directly with the thought process. Prewriting can be compared to the first moment a thought enters the mind of a student. Then the student ponders it more. Once the thought has solidified enough inside his or her mind, a student will communicate it and give it more shape the more the idea is communicated. Other students will communicate different sentiments and the idea will become more refined and understood. The thought process and speech occur much faster than the writing process and composition, however, so repeating the writing process becomes essential.

Though I advocate and choose to employ the teaching of writing as a process, I am not totally opposed to the use of the traditional topic sentence outline. It serves as a

place to start and a useful tool for organization of thoughts. However, I feel that the outline has become a procedural crutch that both students and their teachers depend upon. The journey through the steps of writing as a process is ineffective when followed linearly. Many teachers seem forced into time constraints by mandated curriculum. Their focus serves more to finish each assignment than to create and observe a satisfactory improvement in their students' writing. I will regretfully admit that other teachers are simply lazy. They lack the motivation to operate on an individual level with each student throughout the circular process of composition.

I stated previously that the mechanics of writing were the most difficult to teach because most students perceive them as boring. Overcoming the reluctance of students to concentrate on the technicalities within composition is difficult for any teacher. One of the most effective ways around the boredom is to choose topics that stimulate the interest of the class. Students do not become involved in required topic assignments. They need things that they can argue about or things that maintain their general interest. The focus of a composition class is to improve writing skills, whereas the main goal of papers in other classes is to regurgitate information in order to convince the teacher that you have learned it. Many teachers have taken for granted "that students cannot think for themselves and that they cannot draw conclusions" (Szentkiralyi 75). Getting students to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions involves inspiring them rather than requiring them. I fully believe that the required curriculum can accommodate the need for classroom interest and motivate the students into their own thought process. This is one of my highest long term goals as a prospective teacher.

Inventing individual assignments which help maintain this level of interest and also illustrate the writing skills which need to be discussed is another task that must be overcome. In addition to ideas that I have been exposed to through college courses and approaches that I have observed as a student, I have devised a few of my own ideas. For example, I would like to try out an exercise which would allow my students to take the

lyrics from a song of their choice (with my approval) and write a page description of what they believe the song says in a deeper sense by working through the six steps of the writing process. I think that this will initially help gain their interest, though such an exercise should probably come at the beginning of the year when stimulating them is so crucial. This exercise should help them with both critical reading and should also acquaint them with the writing process that D'Aoust describes. I have had the opportunity to learn other possible exercises that were previously unknown to me through college courses as well. Clustering is a good way to brainstorm that works by "blocking the critical censorship of the analytic left brain" (Rico 14). As the name implies, a cluster is formed by acquainting different, random ideas with an initial word or phrase. Words that follow can also spring from other words and not necessarily the first idea. The technique sounds quite simple, but its benefits are great. While not necessarily organizing thoughts and ideas, clustering does put them all on one level plane where the process of organization can begin. I believe an exercise like this can promote cohesion within the classroom. Students are able to hear the ideas of their classmates and presumably learn to respect the words of others in general. I will also employ individual writing conferences with each student and peer revision in my classroom. I value the teacher-student relationship and the student-classmate relationship as the two greatest assets in a classroom. In his book *To Teach*, William Ayers states that "through peer teaching and small groups . . . we can take on real problems together and strive for real solutions" (95). Building such rapport within a class is not incredibly easy, but has inexplicable advantages when it appears. I believe that such cohesion within the class greatly facilitates learning.

The assignments that I give cannot always be filled with entertainment and excitement. As a teacher of writing, I will be forced to convey the essentials at times. In order to maintain the attention of my class, I realize that I will have to find ways to keep their motivation at a satisfactory level. I know that I will need to show them the importance of the skills that are required and not necessarily enjoyable. Convincing them

that writing is a skill that they will need seems to be one of the hardest tasks of a teacher of writing. On the whole, our society does not value the written word as much as it should. Many people are not taught how much power reading and writing truly have when they are in high school. This should be the goal of nearly every English teacher in my opinion. The motivation to prove the value and worth of the English language should serve as the driving force behind a teacher. A teacher cannot expect his or her students to be willing to learn if that teacher does not appear willing to expend the time and energy to teach.

Describing a writing philosophy can be compared to looking up a word in the dictionary. The definition of the word is of no value if the individual words within the definition are unknown to the reader as well. This situation can lead to an endless loop of constant assessment of writing as a process. The apparent differences in philosophy of writing instruction from teacher to teacher spring from such an infinite recursion. I believe that sharing and honoring these different views is an absolute necessity if the quality of each teacher's instruction is to be enhanced. I hope to learn a few things from the ideas of others and to introduce others to some of my own views that they might not have been acquainted with before through the work of this committee.

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